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William Brewster

1567-1644

Occupation: Pilgrim

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BIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY

Brewster, William, 1567-1644 (1567 - Apr. 10, 1644), Pilgrim father, was an Elder of the Pilgrim Church, first in importance during the Scrooby period, second in importance during the Leyden and Plymouth periods. A deposition of his at Leyden finally settles the dispute about the date of his birth and fixes it in the winter of 1566/67, probably in January. He came to Scrooby in 1571 with his father and mother; his father in 1575 became bailiff of the Manor of Scrooby, one of the exempt estates of the Archbishop of York, and in 1588 was appointed postmaster by Elizabeth when Scrooby was made a post-house on the road between London and York. These positions made the father a man of great importance in the district and provided him with a considerable income. The boy was somehow prepared for the university and entered Peterhouse, Cambridge, in December 1580, where he himself later declared that he acquired his first Separatist ideas. He did not take a degree and perhaps remained at Cambridge only a few months. In the autumn of 1583 he became a member of the household of William Davison, then important in administrative and diplomatic life at the court of Elizabeth, and, becoming one of his trusted retainers, accompanied him on missions to the Netherlands in 1584 and in 1585-86. Despite the disgrace of Davison in 1587 as a result of his part in the execution of Mary Stuart and his consequent retirement from public life, Brewster remained in his service until news of his father's serious illness caused his return to Scrooby in 1589. He served as his father's deputy until the latter's death in 1590 and then was himself appointed to the positions of bailiff and postmaster, retaining both until the exodus to Holland in 1608. He married in 1591 Mary ----, by whom he had before 1620 six children. Gradually he became the protector and then the principal member of a little congregation of

Puritans, gathered from Scrooby and the near-by villages. But they did not "separate" from the Established Church until the autumn of 1606 and it was not until a year later that John Robinson joined them. After some investigation of their proceedings by the High Commission at York, which certainly did not amount to persecution, they decided to leave so ungodly a land and finally succeeded in emigrating to Holland in 1608. Finding Amsterdam also uncongenial, they settled at Leyden in 1609. Here, if not earlier, Brewster became elder and teacher of the new church. To earn a living for his family, he became a printer of Puritan books, written by the leaders in England, and shipped back to them for sale and distribution at home. In 1617 the initiation of the plan for emigration to America took him and others to England where he interviewed officers of the Virginia Company and various royal officials to secure permission to colonize and a grant of land. Beyond much doubt he was the principal envoy. Returning to Leyden, he printed in 1618 or 1619 a book which gave great offense to James I. Of this the English government complained to the Dutch authorities in 1619 with such effect that Brewster felt it wiser to discontinue the press altogether and to return with his family to England where he seems to have lived unmolested until the *Mayflower* sailed in 1620. He played therefore no part in the final steps at Leyden for the emigration to America and was not present when the decision was reached, in April 1620, that the majority should remain at Leyden with Robinson their minister, while the minority should attempt the venture with Brewster himself as their leader. It also seems probable that he played no important part in organizing the company which sailed for America direct from England, being fearful of royal interference with his own emigration. He embarked on the *Mayflower* at London with his wife, two sons, and two boys "bound out" to him. At Plymouth, Brewster was the only church officer until 1629, but held services of prayer and praise only; he expounded the Scripture at length, but was forbidden by the rules to preach, baptize, or celebrate the communion. Though he was therefore never a minister in the Pilgrim sense of the word and though they "called" Smith, Roger Williams, Chauncey, and Reynor as their ministers later, he remained throughout his life the real leader of the church at Plymouth and the man chiefly responsible for its doctrines, observances, and worship. Administrative position was foreclosed to him by his position in the church but he was active in counsel and played a part second only to Bradford in all decisions, great and small. He became one of the Undertakers in 1627 who assumed the Pilgrim indebtedness. His library (*Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 2nd ser., III, 261-74; V, 37-85) proves him to have been well read in history, philosophy, and religious poetry and shows that he continued to buy books throughout his life. We have no idea of his personal appearance but we do know from the inventory of his property (*Mayflower Descendant*, III, 15-27) that he wore a violet colored cloth coat, black silk stockings, a ruff, and other clothing, of impeccable modesty, but less severe than the popular tradition attributes to the Pilgrims. Social life at Plymouth was undoubtedly quiet in the extreme but in it Brewster played a very important part, being, says Bradford, "of a very cheerful Spirite, very sociable and pleasurable amongst his friends." He died Apr. 10, 1644, at Plymouth, possessed of a house, lands, cattle, and personalty worth £107.

FURTHER READINGS